Book Review

Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren & Charles Ess (Eds.): *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2012.

Kaitlyn Alessandra Maria Bolongaro

As Stewart M. Hoover declares in his foreword to this volume, "the digital revolution has brought with it a nearly overwhelming discourse of change." (2012, p. vi). Indeed, since its onset nearly two decades ago, an ongoing discussion about how these new technologies impact cultural practices and social structures has settled in across academic disciplines. This technological development has introduced a sort of panic about how to maintain pre-existing social hierarchies; yet scholars disagree if digital media truly presents an unprecedented technological challenge to society, particularly to communication patterns between individuals.

The anthology *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* is a compilation of research and reflection on religion, computer mediated communication (CMC), and their interaction. The book illustrates the importance of examining the challenge that digital communication presents to religion and its conceptualization of identity, community and authority. The contributions present three veins, including investigation, empirical research and reflection, with subjects ranging from religious organization's communication in cyberspace, church *brandversation* and wikiculture, avatar religion, new media usage by church officials, Twitter as a religious practice, Christian theologies, and historical media comparisons, to name a few.

In the introduction, Pauline Hope Cheong and Charles Ess introduce the concept of religion 2.0 to familiarize us with how Web 2.0 and religion interact on multiple levels, focusing on three prominent themes: identity, community, and authority. The authors

explore the renegotiation of the clergys' authority with congregation members when they communicate online.

The first section, *Theorizing Digital Religion*, begins with Knut Lundby examining the content of religious organizations' communication in cyberspace. He rejects the notion of the Internet as a parallel reality; instead, Lundby argues that offline and online experiences are one in the same with the Internet serving as a necessary extension for the churches' activities.

Bernie Hogan and Barry Wellman present how the Internet has revolutionized social relations and increased communication among people around the world with the rise of networked individualism, Along with Lundby, the authors dispute the distinction between virtual and real-life worlds, while recognizing the persistent digital divide between developed and developing nations.

Bala A. Musa and Ibrahim M. Ahmadu utilize a media ecology approach to analyze the influence of new media, and wikiculture vis à vis church *brandversation*. In other words, they explore how a centralized theocratic institution markets itself without commodifying religious experiences in a new media sphere where knowledge and authority come from user sources.

Heidi Campbell discusses the negotiation process that religious communities undergo when confronted with new media technologies. She explains her religious-social shaping technology theory, using it as a framework to examine the complex engagement of religious bodies with modern communication developments.

Jørgen Straarup explores avatar religion as a recent virtual extension of real-world religious practice. By arguing for a borderless existence between avatar and human puppeteer, he suggests that avatars embarking on a guided spiritual journey still seek virtual community similar to offline experiences.

The second part *Empirical Investigation* introduces Peter Fischer-Nielsen's study of different strategies employed by Danish pastors on the Internet to challenge the rise of secularism. Based on an empirical study conducted on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, this article attempts to map how the ministers' use Internet in their work. Fischer-Nielsen proposes three potential strategies to respond to the challenges presented by new media.

Lorenzo Cantoni and colleagues investigate the appropriation and adoption of information and communication technologies by Catholic priests. Their international study is unique insofar as it analyzes church leaders, namely bishops and priests, and how they understand and utilize new media and their attitude towards it.

Mark D. Johns explores the interactions between individuals and religious organizations on social networking sites. Based on fan page likes on Facebook, Johns observes five groups from different faiths. His findings link group membership to a limited expression of identity rather than active religious participation.

Stine Lomborg and Charles Ess delve into the efforts of churches and their leaders to use social media to keep in touch with their members. The authors focus on a congregation within the Danish National Church identified as an activist church. They further explore how social media may challenge religious authority and hierarchy, blurring the relationship between church leaders and congregants while reinforcing real-life connections among members.

Pauline Hope Cheong analyzes the adoption of Twitter and microblogging by believers to build social capital in religious communities. Cheong advocates the possible advantages for church leadership and members in incorporating microblogging into a range of religious practices including missions and prayer.

Tim Hutchings provides an exhaustive examination of online churches. His study is based on five of the best-known online churches, with data collected through participation observation methods. Hutchings argues that online churches should not only be seen as communities but also as part of broader online and offline religious activities.

In the final section, *Historical and Theological Examinations*, Stefan Gelfgren provides a historical comparison between new media advances in the 19th century and modern times. His research focuses on the hopes and aims of the church faced with new technology from printed tracts and the Internet, arguing against claims that social media has revolutionary implications for humanity.

Peter Horsfield turns his discussion to Christian theology and its historical development. He presents four main communication technologies: orality, literacy, print, and a second orality through electronic media, and argues that new media challenges the church's centralized institution in a more diverse faith market.

Sam Han introduces a different concept: Imago Dei, the Christian belief of human beings made in the image of God. The author discusses the mediation of technology on the relationship among people, God, and nature. His article argues that the computer will create a *re-immanetization* of the Imago Dei.

Lynne M. Baab analyzes three Christian theologies: place, relationship, and sin, and the rise of new communication technologies. She points to how new media encourages individualism that can challenge the authority of religious institutions, while addressing how church leaders can use the Internet to overcome these issues.

Peter Fischer-Nielsen and Stefan Gelfgren conclude the volume by postulating what new media may mean for religion and future research possibilities. They call for increased research efforts regarding six developments as well as new methodological approaches based on academia-church cooperation.

Each chapter in *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* raises different questions relevant for further reflection. However, this anthology is more targeted to raising discussions surrounding the current state of research, and the articles would be beneficial in higher level religious or communication studies courses. The breadth of research covered in this book is perhaps its most valuable contribution to the

discussion of religion and CMC. As such, the collection remains rather broad on the topic as opposed to delving deep into one specific branch of theory or study. Overall, the authors present new insights into the interaction between religion and new communication technologies, creating a comprehensive volume of the latest research in this field.

Kaitlyn Alessandra Maria Bolongaro
Masters Student
Journalism, Media and Globalization
Aarhus University, Denmark
kaitbolongaro@gmail.com